

THE CHARACTER OF THE FEUDAL SOCIETY IN JAPAN (I)

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It is impossible to easily mention what character the feudal society had in Japan as compared with that in Europe, but here I will mention a few problems within my understanding.

I. *Geographical circumstances*

At first we can recognize as the character of the feudal society in Japan that it grew up in a comparatively isolated circumstance without the effect from any other countries. Of course, Ritsuryo [律令] society and *manorial* system [莊園] in Japan were effected from Tang in China, but we must see that there was no relation between China and Buke society (the chivalrous society) arising at the next age in Japan. Moreover, Japan was such an island country in the comparatively isolated circumstance that there was no international trading. I think that this point is the reason why the feudal society in Japan continued longer than that in Europe. After the 17th century Japan abandoned the intercourse with the other countries and entered into Sakoku (closing the country), so the feudal society in Japan more strengthened its closing tendency. But, under Sakoku Japan had intercourse with Holland and China, so it was not perfect but this is one form of controlling trade which had been exercised in Eastern countries. In this point it is a mistake that we emphasize Sakoku.

Secondly, I think it is the great character that the agriculture which was the fundamental production in Japanese feudal society chiefly relied on the rice field as differed from that in Europe which chiefly relied on the dry farming. The feudal lords in Japan had the stronger right over their peasants through the monopolistic government of water than they in Europe. It is sure that the government prevented the peasants from their growing up independently. Such many problems as the form of the agricultural management and the communities related with the rice field can be considered, but I will mention these problems some other time.

II. *Tenno regime and Feudalism*

On what ground then was it possible for the Japanese Royal house-hold which rose in Yamato about the year of Christ to mention the traditional authority

for two thousand years? In order to account for the problem, we must first explain what part this Tenno regime has played in each period and what kind of character it had in this period. The Tenno regime has been deeply concerned with the social political systems in each of ancient, middle, and modern ages of our country, fulfilling many kinds of demands included in the systems until now. How then does the middle-feudalism relate to this Tenno-regime, as the problem requires now? In regard to this point, Doctor Maki Kenji had once the opinion that the special character of the Japanese feudalism consists in that the Shogun (the head of the feudal regime) is entrusted from Tenno with the political power which he calls the entrusted feudalism (*A History of the Formation of Japanese feudalism*). It is rather doubtful, however, whether or not there was such consideration on the side of feudal lords through the feudal age. Through all of those who took the position of the head of feudalism, Takauji Ashikaga, (足利尊氏) Ieyasu Tokugawa [徳川家康], etc., not to speak of Yoritomo Minamoto [源頼朝], were without exception appointed to Seii-taishogun [征夷大將軍], yet we cannot call it entrusted. Moreover, though Yoritomo was given the right to put Shugo and Zito [守護地頭] all over the lands by the Royal-family, but, Muromachi and Edo Bakuhus such ruling right as not necessarily approved by it. Consequently, the conception that the political power of Buke (the military class) was entrusted by the Royal-family, at the end of Edo Bakuhu that sprang up, does not convince us. Nevertheless, the Royal dynasty, with its traditional authority, had been facing the feudal society since the ancient time, and even Shogun (the head of feudalism) could neither deny nor disregard it at all. Yoritomo Minamoto, the founder of Kamakura-Bakuhu, was able to construct its political power only through borrowing the ancient authority of Tenno. At the Muromachi period when the Royal dynasty lost its real power, there appeared even such a man as Moronao Kono [高] who would openly deny the authority of Tenno. But Ashikaga-Uzi wanted to fortify its feudal ruling through borrowing them under the circumstance that the system of ruling country by Shugo on which Ashikaga-Uzi rested could not yet liquidate the ancient relation. Even in the time of rivalry of powerful lords, Tenno was not entirely blotted out, on the contrary, could perform the funeral or enthronement ceremony, etc., being supported by Hoken-Daimyo (feudal lords). At that time when there was almost no Royal territory after the civil war between Southern and Northern dynasties, how could the Tenno-regime continue to exist in this way? This is the problem that requires firstly to think about the feudalism itself.

(1) In the feudal age, as feudal lords exercised self-assumed authority in each district, competing for their ascendance with each other, the world was apt to become disunited one after another and to be led into anarchy. On the other hand, however, there arose the craving to evade such disunited, disordered, and anarchic conditions. Feudal lords too, thought to put the world in order and make it peaceful by creating the steady authority in some form and by depending on it.

(2) Moreover, feudalism is the system constructed on the vertical relation, as

an axis of upper and lower classes. Bushi (vassals) at that time could exercise the authority over the people, while he himself was used to be ruled by his superiors. Even the ruling right of Shogun (the head of feudal regime) was not absolute, for he not possessing all the lands of the country directly, was not able to rule great lords as easily as he could rule his own state. For this reason he was necessitated to rely upon some spiritual authority which he made the ground for his ruling. There remained then, as the spiritual authority, only the Royal family which had preserved traditions since the ancient time. This is very similar to the phenomenon of the European feudal age of each King of France, England and Germany, etc., whose crowns were guaranteed by the Pope. Of course, the supreme authority of Pope was far stronger than that of Tenno, but Tenno as well was deeply related with the faith of gods and had the unseen power over the world of Shinto. This situation of Tenno is similar to that of Pope who was the leader of the Christian world. But the reason why the Royal-dynasty had kept its authority is due to the fact that besides such religious authority, the Royal dynasty traditionally kept its distinguished culture which it had accepted from China in the early time. The aristocratic culture of the ancient time largely influenced the culture of Buke and of Chonin (citizen) in the middle age. When feudal lords searched for the spiritual authority in order to fortify their ruling system after making up their feudal government, the ancient authority of Tenno was used again and was reproduced. When the tendency of the unity spread throughout the country with the establishment of feudalism, the ancient authority was used as the core of the unity once more. We generally recognize the fact that both Nobunaga Oda and Hideyoshi Toyotomi ruled over Daimyos with the authority of Tenno. Although Ieyasu Tokugawa set the Royal dynasty out of the political power, yet he did not forget to respect it as the spiritual and abstract authority. Then feudalism began to expose its contradictions at the Genroku [元禄] period, when large markets were formed in the country and society advanced over the feudal sectionalism. Shishis began to think of going back to the system of the ancient age and the movement of making the Royal dynasty the core of the government began to appear. It was the revolution of Ishin [維新] that gave the abstract authority of Tenno the real super authority and made it the core of the absolute nation. In this case it was most necessary that they make the authority of Tenno absolute as that of gods. The very evidence is that the fundamental principle of the Ishin government was published as Gokajo-no-Goseimom [五箇条御誓文] making an oath to gods. At the age of absolutism in Europe, in order to make the king's government holy it was declared that the right of Kings was given by god, what we know as Theory of Divine Right of Kings. We can find the similar relation with it in Tenno after Ishin. Thus the Tenno regime has changed its character from the ancient system to the feudal one and still more to the absolute system. In this case, we necessarily bring to mind the relation between the right of king and Pope in Europe. In Japan, because feudalism was in the circumstance of the international isolation, Tenno regime has never been struck down by the outer power and has continued to

exist though it has often changed its type.

III. *The feudal relation of lord and vassal*

Then, as compared with the European feudalism, the Japanese feudal relation of lord and vassal was not so free as the European, and was very rigorous. Originally, the feudal relation is that of obligation and servitude and on the mutual assistance. So the feudal relation is radically different from the slavery relation of the ancient time. But, following the historical trace of the relation of lord and vassal, feudalism of every country had vividly the relation of the ancient time at first. Therefore lords had mostly the unlimited powers over their vassals. But, with the advancement of the feudal system, the positions of vassals were promoted and the free relation on the promise of the lord and vassal was advanced. In our country it seems that Kamakura-Shogun (the head of feudal regime) treated his Gokenin (vassals) as a family member, as the powerful Myoshu (a kind of feudal lords) treated his vassals at the Kamakura age which is thought to be the first feudal age, and the man who could become Gokenin was the head of his family. The other sons had only the indirect relation to Kamakura-Shogun and served him according to the rate previously decided by the head. Therefore, at first, the right of the head of a family was very strong and it was said that to obey his order is more important than to obey the order of Shogun. The relation between the head and the other sons was that of regimentation on the blood-relation and of the same family on the same religious celebration. In this meaning the other sons depended on the head as their father or their lord, and the pure relation of head and lord had not come into being. But as the unity of the whole family on the blood-relation became loose at the end of Kamakura, the other sons began to be independent of the head. They united in one district, centering the powerful man in them. This unity in the one district is called Ikki [一揆]. Through the civil war between South and North dynasties, Shugo [守護] (a kind of feudal lords) gradually gained Ikki to his own side and made heads of Ikkis his vassals. But they only looked up to Shugo-Daimyo who suited their convenience, so they often exchanged their lord when he was inconvenient to them. Their relation is similar to the state in which feodatories united and changed their lord in Germany in the 11th or 12th century. When the feudal relation was contracted, not only the previous ceremony of the audience was done but also the rigorous document of promise was made. The document was not the common one but Kishomon, the witness of which was all of gods or Buddha. As the idea of the bilateral contract between lord and vassal became strong, it even happened that one Samurai (vassal) served several lords. On the contrary, when his lord was not powerful or did not give him a reward, he parted from his lord and sought for a fief at another place. It may be due to these that many vassals wandered about to train themselves as Goto Matabei [後藤又兵衛] walked about to serve a lord with the best Yari [槍] in Japan. When the lord was ruined, vassals could serve other lords, for

the lord discharged his vassals and gave them *Itoma-sarijo* [いとま去り状] (the certificate that a vassal might serve another lord). But, with the completion of Shokuho (Oda and Toyotomi) and Tokugawa government, the loose feudal relation of lord and vassal became the very absolute morality of the allegiance, owing to the morality of Confucianism. The effort strengthening the feudal order made the relation of lord and vassal the fate which could not be moved by anything. Exclaiming the proverb that the relation of parent and child is of one generation, husband and wife of two generations present and future, lord and vassal of three generations, it was seen that the plighted troth of lord and vassal is deeper than that of parent and child, or husband and wife. After all, the Japanese feudal relation of lord and vassal was fundamentally founded on favour and service, but the power of the head was stronger than that of the lord in the immature steps of the feudal system. After the 14th century this relation began to wear the contracting character with the growth of the feudal relation. But this relation was again changed to the morality of the absolute allegiance with the establishment of the feudalism. The relation of lord and vassal in Europe was similarly changed to the relation on the loyalty to a king with the establishment of the right of a King of every country except Germany. In regard to this point it does not seem that the relation of lord and vassal in Japan was widely different from that in Europe. The different point is only that the loyalty to a lord was powerfully required and was occasionally made the absolute morality in Japan. Such a situation may be due to the fact that the power of a lord in Japan was stronger than that in the other countries.

IV. The system of social status

The next problem is the one of feudalism and of social status. With the development of the feudal society, we can see that the discrimination of the governor and governed people grew clear and the social and legal position was fixed by their natural position. Consequently, the people finished their life time belonging to the high class or the low class of their society.

In our country *Heino Bunri* [兵農分離] (the separation of Samurais and peasants) and *Shono Bunri* [商農分離] (the separation of merchants and peasants) were clear in the Azuchi-Momoyama era when the feudalism of our country was established firmly, and the wellknown *Mibun-Horei* (law and ordinance concerning social status of the people) was proclaimed by Hideyoshi (the most powerful lord in Japan at the Momoyama era). Before the times of Hideyoshi, on the one hand we can see that the difference of the social position of Samurai and peasants was clear, on the other hand Samurai took part in the direct agriculture management as their daily work, and the landowner who was a direct agricultural producer, was able to be a soldier. But after *Katanagari* [刀狩] by Hideyoshi in the latter half of the 16th century the right of arming of peasants (except partial peasants) was taken away. Consequently, a line was gradually drawn between Samurai and peasants as the difference of their occupation. When we compare this Katana-

gari and the No-arming (the robbing of of arms) that was performed extensively toward the peasants at the end of the 12th century in England, we can see the same tendency in these two things. The thing corresponding with the social position of the citizen in England is Chonin [町人]. Formerly, those who were settled merchants and manufacturers were called Chonin compared with the merchants who scattered as pedlers, but when Sho-No-Bunri was carried into execution and merchants and manufacturers concentrated in cities the phenomenon of Chonin-merchants appeared. Consequently, the social status of Chonin was established. In this point, the social status system in Japan is not different from the structure of the occupational position of European feudal society. But in the case of Japan the discrimination of Shi-No-Ko-Sho (Samurai-peasants-manufacturers-merchants) was derived from Chinese ancient thoughts and was thought only in books in the Kamakura-Muromachi era when commerce and manufacture were not prosperous. This discrimination, however, was really adopted as a social status according to the establishment of feudalism. But two social status, Sho and Ko, are the same on the treatment from the governor. And so, social status system of Japan is really the same as the three social positions in Europe. It seems that in the case of Europe the position of citizens after the establishment of feudalism, however, was not so neglected as in Japan or rather belonged to a higher class than the position of the former. Moreover, the mutual conversion of these four social status at the period of the establishment of the feudalism of our nation, was not permitted. Still more, the strict social status was observed even in language and custom and there was generally marriage between relations in the same class. The heredity of the occupation that was expressed by the following proverb "An onion will not produce a rose", was a fundamental principle, and there was a strict discrimination between the social status in Europe. But European society being apt to circulate, the discrimination of social status in Europe was not so observed as in our country. But the larger difference is that there were Burakumin [部落民] who were treated as a social status out of four social status in the feudal status of our country. In Kamakura and Muromachi period, there were generally two kinds of the humbles (Senmin [賤民]); one who belonged in the slavery to the manor lords such as nobles, shrines and temples, and the others who were free from lords and lived drifting lives. Some of them were the survivors of Be [部] that were not discharged even under the Ritsuryo [律令] regime, but in a common case their origins are in the obscurity. Those who were engaged in butchery or leatherwork were called Kawata [皮太], Kawatsukuri [皮作] or Kawahagi [皮剥]. They were set free from the shrines or temples and put under the control of the feudal lord (Daimyo), as the demands increased for the leather for the munitions of war, in the end of the Sengoku period. They were concentrated in the outskirts of the castle-town of the lord and formed the special community of Buraku. Afterwards the population of Burakumin (members of the special community) increased rapidly and at last their name became to represent all the humble. They were given very poor rice fields and cultivated them on the smaller scale than the general. And there was the strict

discrimination concerning their marriage and dwelling. Burakumin were able to marry only between their own groups. If they married peasants or Chonin (Citizen), they were punished.

As their social status was hereditary, they could never become commoners under any circumstance and on the contrary the commoners were never reduced to the rank of Senmin (the Humbles). Through all the Edo era, like this, a few Japanese people, who belonged to the lower rank than Shi-No-Ko-Sho (vassal-peasant-manufacturer-merchant) had to live a miserable life under the strict discriminative treatment. But observing these phenomena from the view of point of the world history, we could perceive them more or less in any feudal society. For example, in England we can see little discriminating treatments for the leather-workers in the following fact—in the cities of England about the 13th century people, who engaged in leather-work, were never permitted to live in the part of a river but were compelled to live in the lower part in the form of Buraku (the special community). In the European feudal societies, the Jews were treated very discriminatively from the religious prejudice, and formed their special community, but they were not treated as a special social status. Seeing, however, many Asiatic countries, we can recognize the same community that was called Burakumin in Japan. They are Hakucho [白丁] in Korea and Pariah in India. Hakucho in the age of Ri-si engaged in the execution of the death, Hakañori, the butchery, butcher, and the leather-worker, and formed the special community. Pariah in India were people who converted from the Animistic tribe namely the primitive community, which was in the outside sphere of Hinduism, and they belonged to the fifth caste which was the lowest of them all. And it seemed to contaminate the members of the higher caste that Pariah kept in touch with the higher, and moreover they were not permitted to live in the same village with the other higher Hindus, but were compelled to live in the neighbouring villages. Comparing such Indian humbles with Burakumin in Japan (the humble), we must pay attention to the fact that the members of Japanese Burakumin were very few. The total member of the Indian humbles corresponded to about 17 percent of the total population. On the contrary, in the case of Japan, the number of the humble corresponded to about one per cent of the main-land's population in the 4th year of Meiji. Their occupations were leather work, bamboo work, cleaner and keeper. The reason why their occupations were scorned, seems to depend upon the belief that man must kill animals. This belief was based on the thought of the transmigration of the soul, which is characteristic in the Indian religion, and on the thought of the causality-retribution being supported by the transmigration of the soul. In either case, feudalism in Japan had the exclusive tendency which was general in the Asiatic society and included the status of Burakumin as the status out of the status. This point is the great character different from the feudal society in Europe.